



Rain can't dampen rally for hospital expansion

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More than 100 people didn't let a light rain dampen their enthusiasm for the proposed \$300-million expansion of Penticton Regional Hospital.

The placard-waving crowd turned out for Wednesday's outdoor rally next to the hospital, reiterating previous calls for provincial government money for the project. Dozens of passing motorists honked their horns in support.

The rally followed the recent provincial budget, which contained no designated funding towards a new ambulatory care tower at PRH.

The province is being asked to contribute \$160 million, while the Okanagan-Similkameen Regional Hospital District will contribute \$120 million. The South Okanagan-Similkameen Medical Foundation has pledged to collect a further \$20 million in donations for equipment.

Gerry Ryan and Tim Gordon, members of the medical foundation's board of directors, were among those holding signs on a sidewalk opposite the hospital.

Ryan acknowledged there's only so much health care money available for hospital projects, but no one is giving up hope. He said concerned residents must keep up the political pressure to persuade Victoria to provide its share of the funding.

"There's a certain amount of politics in the process," Ryan said. "I think we've got to keep doing what we can to stay in the forefront and make sure our voices are heard."

Gordon said it's vitally important that whoever wins the upcoming provincial election is aware of the Penticton hospital's needs. He noted PRH was never built to handle the South Okanagan's current population.

"The way our (aging) demographics are going, it will be critical before too much longer, in fact if it isn't now," Gordon said.

Local physicians continue to take an active role in the awareness campaign, with support from the B.C. Nurses' Union, Hospital Employees' Union, and the Health Sciences Association.

Dr. Sarah Broder told the crowd Penticton Regional Hospital has been short-changed in capital funding for the past decade.

"For the last 10 years, Penticton has been getting \$22 per person/per year for capital projects," she said. "Vernon, which has a similar sized community, has been getting \$98 per person."

Broder applauded those who turned out for the rally.

"It is wonderful to see all of us, standing shoulder to shoulder in the rain and the snow, telling everybody that we need our tower now," she said.

Dr. Brad Raison noted over the past

30 years, Summerland General Hospital has been closed, Princeton General Hospital has been become an "outpost," while surgeries and obstetrics no longer take place at South Okanagan General Hospital in Oliver.

Raison noted that Vernon has seven operating rooms, while PRH has three aging ones.

"What bright politician is going say it's cheaper to send you to Vernon for your surgery than to build the hospital (expansion) in Penticton?" he said. "If you don't get the site, nothing will happen."

Dr. David Paisley, president of the Penticton Medical Society, said close to 5,000 letters in support of the project have been sent to the health minister.

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